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The Song of Korthan

By Francis B. Taylor



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The Song of Korthan

By
FRANCES BEATRICE TAYLOR



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THE SONG OF KORTHAN



HE birthday of the Child was passed by many days when Korthan, the Minstrel, came to Bethlehem.

"Thou art late, Minstrel," the keeper of the khan told him, standing in the low doorway to survey his guest with goodhumoured tolerance. Like all men who knew him, he loved Korthan, and like all men, deemed him mad.

Yet he was a fine figure enough, there in the narrow, flagged street, tall, and for all his sixty years as straight as a lad. The madness of Korthan, if madness it might be, was of a nobler sort than most.

He answered quietly, though one watching closely might have seen the clear line of his lips quiver a little, as a child's may, hurt with a bitter disappointment.

"Aye, I am come too late, Uzzar," he said, "these three weeks have I lain sick of a fever in the house of one, Levi, a six-hour journey beyond Jerusalem, but as soon as the fever left me I came hither to seek thy guests."

"And passed them in Jerusalem itself, if the story goes true," Uzzar answered. "The village folk have it that the Child hath been taken to the temple there, and that suddenly, in the night, the three, father and mother and child, disappeared, none knew whither."

"But thou knowest," Korthan said eagerly, "thou didst follow them?"

"I? I have my task here in the inn and have been near to distraction with the fret and hurry of it—what time had I to seek after some poor Galilæan, whose name even I have forgotten? The maid I mind, for she was but a maid in years, and she had a sweet sorrow in her face—for that I would have found them better housing if I could, but what would

you? These be vigilant times, Minstrel, and there were finer folk than they to house for the taxing."

"But that night—thou sawest the Child and the Star—thou heardest the singing of the angels, Uzzar?"

The innkeeper shook his head impatiently.

"I tell thee I saw them not. I heard nothing," he said, "my ears were well filled with the scoldings of this guest and that—I paid no heed to these strangers in my cattle shed."

Korthan, the Minstrel, gave a great sigh. On a sudden years seemed added to his age, his broad shoulders bowed beneath the burden of the harp slung across them. As he turned slowly from the door of the khan, Uzzar's heart smote him.

"Stay, Korthan, and rest," he said, "the guests are gone, and there is room and to spare for thee—thou art not yet well of thy fever."

"Nay, then, I thank thee, innkeeper, but

I have somewhat to seek and the finding of it is not here."

"What, art still searching for thy King? Man, it is not well to talk of kings, save one."

"But this was a King, the King of my long quest," Korthan cried. "I saw with these eyes the light of the Star go sweeping across the heavens, in the semblance of a crown; I myself heard the choir of angels singing towards this place—think you they sang for less than a king?"

"A holy Child, may be, but a king, no," Uzzar said, and looked about him hurriedly and a little anxious. "Cæsar is king, and after him Herod, and none other. It is well for thee to be silent with thy kings, Minstrel."

But Korthan went from the door with dragging feet.

In the courtyard a woman met him, Naomi, the innkeeper's wife. She looked at him curiously.

"Thou art come late to find our guests,

Minstrel," she said, and Korthan nodded his head slowly, then, moved by a sudden thought, paused.

"Didst thou see the little King, Naomi?" he asked eagerly.

The woman came a step nearer to him.

"Dost thou mean the Babe, Korthan?" she queried, "then, indeed, I saw Him and held Him in these arms, but Uzzar, my lord, bids me say naught. It is not good to speak freely of kings, where even the walls have ears. Hast thou heard of the decree of Herod?"

"I have heard nothing," Korthan said.
"These three weeks have I lain ill in Levi's house and I have seen and heard naught that I took heed to since that night of the Star and the Angels."

"It was a miracle," Naomi said sadly, "but it has brought only sorrow upon the land. I myself saw not the Star, only a fair light, for I was busy with my serving and came not to door or casement, but some of the village folk have strange tales to tell,

how this one and that was wakened by the singing as of heavenly voices, and saw above the inn a light so great that never it fell from any star. The singing passed, they say, but a mighty Star shone all night long above the khan and only died away at dawn; and I, when in the early day I went forth myself, to see that of which the maids talked so wildly, I saw shepherds, rough folk from the hills yonder, leaving the door of the khan. 'How found ye your way hither?' I asked them, and they answered me: 'We have seen His star and have come and worshipped. He is the Messiah.' And they told me, how, watching their flocks over against the city, they heard the sound of singing, and were sore afraid of the hosts of light that seemed suddenly to fall above them, from the very gates of heaven, and how an angel spoke with them and told them of the Babe that would be born here, in our khan, and that he should be the Messiah, and should redeem Israel."

"King of Israel." There was a faint note

of scorn in Korthan's voice. "Thine own books of the law tell what thy kings have been. Nay, He is more than that; five and forty years have I sought a king who should be greater than these, greater even than Cæsar. His slave should I be, His vassal, His minstrel only, and that King is born."

"Oh, I know not," Naomi said in a distressed voice, "would God He were a king indeed, and might rid us of our bondage, but I am fearful; the land will lie waste before the sword of Herod, who hath heard of the coming of the Messiah, and hath decreed that all the little babes shall die, he will have no King usurping his throne. For, after the shepherds came strangers, men of many tongues from some land that I know Out of the East they came, and not. brought rich gifts to the Babe, a golden crown, one, and sweet-smelling spices, and incense that burned about His head, as in the very sanctuary of the Temple. They called Him King, but they are not Israelite—truly I know not, but because of Him there is fear in all the land, and I thank God that I and my lord are childless."

"And these Eastern travelers, whither went they?" Korthan asked.

"Out in the dawn by a road whence they came not," Naomi answered. "I sat by the mother and the Babe, and gave them little heed, for in my arms I held the Child—indeed, never was a baby like Him, His eyes were as corn flowers at reaping time and even in His sleep He smiled. The children came in hundreds to bring Him their little gifts."

"But whither have they gone, the father and the mother and the Babe?" Korthan asked impatiently—every moment saw them farther on their journey, while he listened to the garrulity of the innkeeper's wife.

"Nay, that I do not know. At dawn one morning I went out to see how they fared. Some of the guests were gone, and I besought Uzzar that he would bring them to the inn itself, but he feared this talk of kings might anger the Governor, and said

me nay. So in the dawn I went to visit them and they were gone. The man had left us payment for the poor place we had given them, but no word of whither they went."

"But their names—thou must have learned their names, and the town whence they came?"

Again Naomi shook her head.

"I asked them not," she said. "The mother's name was Mary, but a maid she was, with eyes that were blue like the Babe's, and wide, with a sort of wonder, only very sad, while His were merry. I think they were heavenly folk and came not from any earthly place, and for aught I know, they have returned thither—but He will come back, that I do know. There came a merchant through Jaffa gate, who said that he heard of such as they in the Temple at Jerusalem—but I think he spoke untruly, for it is the Messiah."

"Nay, sister—one so fair born for thy people only? He is no Israelite, of that I

am sure, and until I have found Him I shall take no rest by day or night."

"Thou hast sought thy King so many years, thou hast taken but little rest at any time, Korthan," the woman answered; "but this Child I fear me thou shalt never find—if He be indeed the promised one, that shall He be in secret until the time of revealing is come, and if He be not, then hath He already perished by Herod's sword."

He hath not perished, and I shall find Him," Korthan said, and he went out through the gateway into the narrow street.

Out on the rough cobbles, between the flat-fronted white houses, the Bethlehem children were at play in the pale sunlight, waiting the coming of the beloved Minstrel, and heedless of the sword that would so soon sweep across the blossoming fields of Palestine, casting the frailest blooms adrift upon the wind.

"Korthan, Korthan," cried the children, "sing to us, sing to us."

So Korthan stayed his eager feet and in

the little market place gathered the wee folk about him, but he did not sing.

"Didst thou see the Babe, Korthan?" they asked him and scarce waiting his reply there rose a merry babel of sound from this shrill little voice, and that.

"I saw him—and I—and I—I kissed His little feet, Korthan, pink they were like fallen rose-petals—and I, and I—"

"I gave Him my baby lamb," Asa, the shepherd's son, said proudly. "I think, when He is a man, He will be a shepherd, like my father, and I, so wisely did He fold my lamb in His tiny arms."

Then again the eager chorus: "Sing to us, sing to us."

So Korthan unstrapped the harp that lay across his shoulders, and laid his singing hands upon it, and waited.

"What shall I sing, little children?" he asked.

"Sing us the Song of the Star, Minstrel," they cried, but Korthan shook his head and his hands lay still along the silver strings. "That song I cannot sing you," he said, "for forty and five years I have sought that song, and now it has come to me, learned of the star, but I shall not sing it to a living soul until I sing it to the King himself; but now will I sing you the song of my Quest, instead."

"The Quest, the Quest," shouted the children, "sing us the song of the Quest."

HEN Korthan, the Minstrel, took his harp and sang to the Bethlehem children the song of his pilgrimage, how he had forsaken

his home and his rich heritage, and his father's house, for the quest of a dream, a dream of a King who should rule, not Israel alone, but all the universe; one mightier, and holier, and kinglier than all that should come after. "Solomon was such," the Israelites told him, but it was not a Solomon he sought. "Solomon is dead," said Korthan, the Minstrel. "My King shall not die." "Then it is the Messiah," they said, but it was not the Messiah. Messiah shall be of the people of Israel, of the lineage of David," said Korthan, the Minstrel, "I am not a Jew." And in the other lands whither he journeyed, the warm sunny lands of the south, the high, white lands to the north, the wind-swept country by the sea, men loved him, and called him

mad. Into Rome he went, to the court of Cæsar, sang to them, played to them, made rich-coloured song for their feasts, and rendered unto Cæsar his due, but found not the King. Into the north he went, to the great halls of the Vikings, played to them, sang to them, made mighty battlesongs, and did obeisance to their lords, and found not the King. Into the white-pillared groves of Athens he went, into the courtyards of the fountains, made song and music for their games, light singing for their dances, bowed at the fair feet of their maidens, but found not the King. "Now shall I go forth again," sang Korthan, the Minstrel, "and none shall stay my feet until I find Him, for on the night of nights the King was born, and here in my heart lies the Song of His Star, learned on the hills at nightfall, a song I shall not sing until I find Him," sang Korthan, the Minstrel.

Wondering, the children listened. Very old and dear to them was the Song of Korthan's Quest, but never had he sung as

now, and never had lain so kind a smile on the face they loved.

"What sang the angels, Korthan?" asked Asa, the shepherd's son, and leaned against the Minstrel's knee, lifting wide eyes to his face.

"Why, as to that, little one," he answered, "there is no like in all the world to that song that ever I have heard. What says thy father, the shepherd, he was of those who hearkened?"

"It was at nightfall," the child said gravely, "and he scarce can tell save that all the sky seemed suddenly as at early dawn, and then there was a stir of mighty wings, and the angels were there, bidding them fear not, but journey hither, where the little Babe lay, and my father came and the others, not knowing why, and fearful. Wert thou also afraid, dear Minstrel?"

"I, afraid of singing? Nay, little Asa. Rather I laughed to hear so fair a melody and would have followed it right gladly, but that the fever was upon me. Aye, I heard them singing, I saw the angels, though, indeed, I think I have seen them before this time, at dusk by the sea, and at early morning on the hills, when no man save I was astir. Straight across the sky they flew, so near it seemed the lifted hand might brush the flying folds of their white robes, so fair, that their faces were as the dawn itself for splendour. From south to north, their wide wings swept the sky, now pale as the foam on a summer sea, now rosetinted as the snows on Lebanon's brow, now warm gold, from the glory of the star that shone above them, but I heard not their song, for ever the star sang also; and I minded the words of that sweet singer of Israel, how the morning stars sang together, and thus I know that at last my King had come into the world."

"Korthan, dear Korthan, whither wilt thou go?" cried the children. "Thou art weary with much seeking; stay with us a little."

But Korthan laid his hand on the fair

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head of Asa, the shepherd's son, and bade them be at peace. "If I find Him not before that night comes round again," he said, "then shall I return to seek Him here." And so went upon his way.



OR a score of years went Korthan, the Minstrel, from end to end of the land, and made songs for the marriages and the

burials, songs for the harvest and the seedtime, songs for rich and poor alike, for those who mourned and those who feasted, for the merchant in the crowded bazaar, for the fisher by the lonely sea, for twenty long years, and found not the King.

Each birthnight he returned, watching the night through by the little Bethlehem khan. Uzzar was dead, and Naomi, his wife, with her own people in another part of the country; the children had grown to manhood, and Asa kept his father's sheep on the low Judæan hills, and by many the Minstrel was forgotten. New friends are for the young, and Korthan's step was slow, and his voice less merry, and his fingers heavier on the harp, so that at the feasts

another took his place, and he had not found the King.

Till there came a birthnight when he was far from the little Bethlehem town, with age and weariness upon him.

"I am old," said Korthan, the Minstrel, "and I have failed. I shall never find the King, and when I am gone the song of the star will be forgot and men shall say it was a dream."

Nightfall found him on the outskirts of the white-walled town of Nazareth, in a part of the land where he was all but a stranger and there was no house where he might find a friend. "I must beg bread and shelter this night," he said, "and in the morning I shall die."

Thus he came to the house of one Joseph, a carpenter. Under the eastern wall of the house stood the carpenter's shop, a low, flat-roofed building, the one window faced to the east. In the doorway Korthan stood still, a great weariness upon him, but ere he might speak the word that asked for food

and shelter, the word that in four score and five years he had never spoken, there turned to him from the lathe beneath the window the carpenter's Son.

"Joseph is from home," he said.

But when he saw how spent and weary was his guest, he came to him swiftly and drew him within the shop, and led him to the low couch along the farther wall and brought him wine from the house, and little wheaten cakes.

Then, having comforted him, he went back to the slow turning of his lathe under the window.

Korthan, the Minstrel, lay still. Out of the pale twilight, that gathered in the low room, moved the young hands of the carpenter's son, slender and strong, and ruddy with the wind and sun. He was but a lad, tall and straight and fair. Under the quiet brow, his eyes were blue as the flower of the corn, deep and still as the harbour water of a summer sea, and as he toiled, he sang to himself, very softly. "What dost thou fashion, carpenter?" Korthan asked him. Men who laboured, he knew, and men who sang, but men who sang and laboured—no!

"Why, now this, now that," he answered. "To-day, because it is the eve of my birthday, I have made gifts for the children, flying creatures, and little beasts."

"And what says thy father, the carpenter? Is he content that thou shouldst idle thy time in making playthings for the children?"

The carpenter's Son laughed, and his laughter was like a morning wind that blows free over blossoming fields.

"Nay, my Father hath no greater pleasure than to fashion playthings for His children," he answered. "His sorrow is that they, who are so careful and troubled over many things, have forgot to play."

There fell a silence in the little shop. Behind the boy's head a single star hung in the cool green of the evening sky. His face lay in the shadow, but through the dusk his hands moved softly. Korthan lay content.

"Sing to me, Minstrel," the carpenter's son said after a little, but Korthan looked at him sadly.

"I am old for singing," he said, "and all my songs are forgot save one, and that one I may not sing."

"A song of labour? Couldst thou not sing me a song of labour?" But Korthan shook his head.

"I have journeyed these many years," he said slowly, "and I have never laboured. Of this wine and that have I drunk, sat at one man's board and another, feasted with them and mourned, but I have done no labour in all my life. I have finished no one task, and now my life itself is finished, and my songs, all that was mine on earth, are forgotten."

The carpenter's son smiled at him.

"Grieve not for that, good Minstrel," he said gently, "there be toilers, and there be singers, and when thou are come to my Father's house, thou wilt have songs enough,

and none shall be forgotten. Now rest, thou, and I will sing to thee."

Swiftly he set the wheel aside, and gathered from floor and carving bench the narrow, curled shavings of fragrant wood. From his hands the slender streamers fell like ribbons of silver in the starlight. On the window ledge above his head the little creatures he had made stood in orderly array, a sandalwood bird with lifted wings, a lamb. Korthan gave him the harp, though in his life no hand save his had touched the silver strings, and in the cool dusk the carpenter's son sang to him, standing against the narrow frame of the window, against the quiet evening sky, against the star that lifted and glowed behind his head as a halo might. Very tender, the strong, young fingers swept the jaded strings, and the sweet young voice rose in the song of labour that the carpenter's son sang to Korthan, the Minstrel.

"My hand hath lost it's cunning," the Minstrel said gravely. "Thou singest well,

young carpenter, but I call not thy song a song of labour."

"There is but one song," the boy answered, "the Song of Love, and Laughter, and Labour—lacking one there can be no music in the singing."

"There is another song," Korthan cried, and would have sat upright but that the other stayed him with lifted hand.

"Listen, friend," he said, and Korthan lay still.

Through the song there sounded the slow, steady surge of the sea, through the song a golden thread ran, surely, unchanging, unwavering and over it, and above, leaped and pulsed a rainbow tapestry of sound, laughter, the far calling of bird-voices, the shouting of children, and under these the golden woof of sound.

"Husbandmen," said Korthan, the Minstrel, "fishers by the sea, toilers in the market place. I knew not that men sang at their labour; it is a new song."

"Then shall I sing you the song of

songs," cried the carpenter's Son, "the song of the Three Gifts—Love, that is myrrh for the healing of the soul; Gold, which is the sum of man's labour for the King; Laughter, the incense from earthly altars. Hark you, Minstrel."

But, listening, Korthan knew.

"It is the Song of the Star," he said, and wept, and laughed, and wept again, and was of a sudden in great peace.

"My King, my King!" cried Korthan, the Minstrel, and would have taken again his harp, but that the will was gone from his fingers, and into his eyes was come the dimness of far spaces.

"A lifetime have I sought Thee," he whispered, "and now I have found Thee, and I cannot sing Thee Thy song."

Then the carpenter's Son came to him and laid his young hands on his head and bade him be at rest.

"All thy life thou hast sung to me, brother," he said, "and all thy songs have pleasured me. No song of the forest and

the wind and the sea, no cry of praise at morning and evening, no sleep song for the little children, that I have not heard, I and My Father. Thou hast bound thy life with laughter, and made pleasant the paths of thy feet, so shalt thou have less to learn in My Father's house. There be many mansions, Korthan, but for the faint-hearted, and the weeping, the House of Joy is very far to go, yet thou shalt keep my birthday feast."

Now through the little room the starlight flowed, a silver tide; out on the hills a shepherd called to his flock; a child's voice sounded in the village street. Softly the carpenter's son laid on the silent strings the quiet fingers of Korthan, the Minstrel, but Korthan was away, crying the Song of the Star at the city gates.

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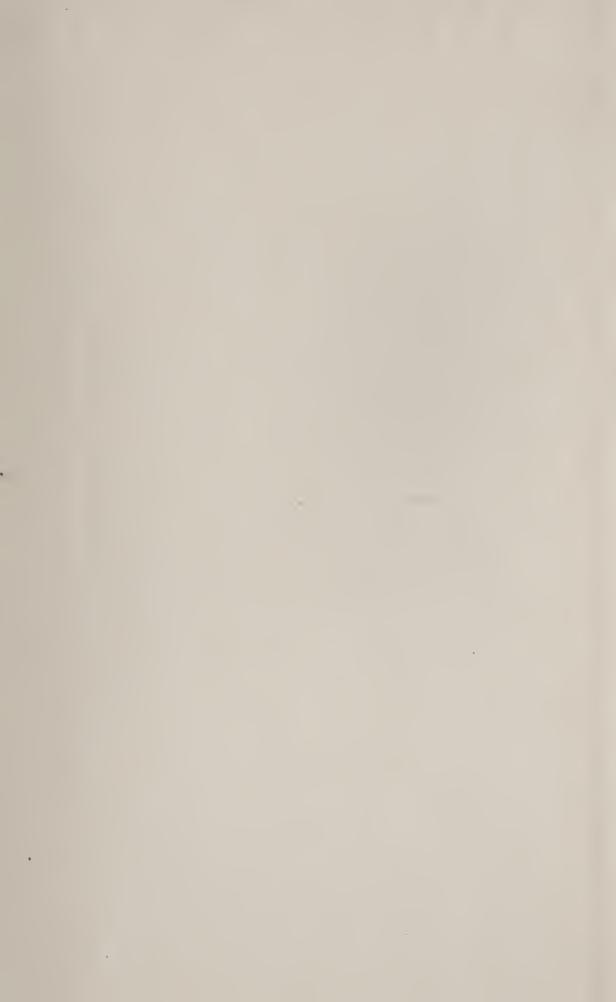
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